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ABSTRACT

A 32-month project has been designed to study the process of school development planning in British primary schools and to evaluate the impact of such planning on the work of individual schools, the learning opportunities for individual pupils, and the professional development of individual teachers. When completed in June 1994, this project should be able to provide answers to the following questions: (1) what impact do school development plans and the planning process have on whole school management, classroom learning, and pupil learning; (2) are some plans more effective than others; (3) what are the key elements of successful practice and the implications of these for Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and schools; and (4) do the theoretical postulates apply to the results, or do they need to be modified in light of the study? Interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaires are being used to gather data in 18 classrooms in 9 schools, all located in 3 contrasting LEAs. (MDM)

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The Impact of School Development Planning in Primary Schools

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(3) Abstract:

This 32 month funded project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. It is directed by Peter Mortimore and Barbara MacGilchrist. The Research Officer is Jane Savage and the Research Associate, Charles Beresford. The project is endeavouring to study the process of School Development Planning and to evaluate the impact of such planning on the work of the school. This presentation will provide an overview of the project (which will be completed in June 1994) and give some detail on the methods of data collection at LEA, inspector, governor, parent, headteacher, classteacher and classroom level.

Key themes which are beginning to emerge will then be discussed. These include:

(i) The impact of plans and planning on the management of the school as a whole.

(ii) The learning opportunities of individual pupils.

(iii) The professional development of individual teachers.

(iv) The attitudes towards and the support for school development planning by individual LEAs.

(v) The immediate and long term effects of planning.

(vi) How change takes place in schools.

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Overview of research project

We are seeking to describe and analyse the impact of School Development Plans and the planning process in primary schools on the school as a whole, the learning opportunities for individual pupils and the professional development for individual teachers. In order to illuminate the context in which schools are working we are also investigating the attitudes towards and the support for school development planning provided by Local Education Authorities (LEAs). We are seeking to explore the rationale for the value of school development planning, identify and disseminate implications for future practice in schools and LEAs and strengthen the links between theory and practice particularly in relation to the literature on school management, improvement, effectiveness and development.

Main aims and objectives

1. To carry out an empirical investigation of the implementation and impact of School Development Plans in primary schools in order to provide a contribution to knowledge in the form of a detailed description of an innovative development.

2. To contribute to the formulation of theory through the testing of a set of theoretical postulates related to innovative developments in schools.

3. To identify good practice and disseminate it to policy makers and practitioners.

Theoretical postulates

These have been drawn from a review of the literature. They are that schools are likely to improve if:

1. Most staff and the headteacher can agree on a clear mission for the institution.

2. A systematic audit of current strategies and weaknesses is carried out.

3. A change plan is thoroughly thought through.

4. An outside agent is involved.

5. The implementation of the change plan is supported by all appropriate external authorities.

6. An evaluation of progress is used formatively to support the implementation.

Four research questions

1. What impact do School Development Plans and the planning process have on whole school management, classroom learning and pupil learning?

2. Are some plans more effective than others?

3. What are the key elements of successful practice and the implications of these for LEAs and schools?

4. Do the theoretical postulates apply to the results; do they need to be modified in the light of the data generated by this study?

Outcomes

1. A clear description of an innovatory development.

2. A related set of formative and summative evaluations of the concurrent and longer term impact of SDPs on the management of schools and classrooms and the progress and development of pupils.

3. Examination of the theoretical postulates listed already.

4. Examples of good practice.

5. A dissemination programme - if appropriate- in a series of articles, a major publication in book form on the subject of school development plans and an inservice programme for headteachers, teachers and LEA advisors.

Methodology

We are working in detail with nine schools in three contrasting LEAs. These schools of differing sizes, catchment areas, organisational type and with headteachers of various years of experience were selected from an example of a rural, urban and inner-city LEA to provide the project with as balanced a sample group as possible. School staffs with different experiences and attitudes to development planning were also selected. After discussion with the LEAs concerned, initial contact and data gathering relating to the above selection criteria were made via a telephone interview. All schools were and are willing participants in the research project.

A mixture of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods are being used. Data is being coded and analysed using SPSS and Apple software.

Semi-structured interviews have taken place with the headteachers, two classteachers per school, the chair of governors and a parent governor. Detailed classroom observations (four in 1992/3) have taken place in all eighteen classrooms being studied. In 1993/4 these observations will continue. The focus is the impact that the School Development Plan has on the pupils so they will be followed through which will necessitate more interviews with their new classteachers in 1993/4. Children of the full age range from 3 to 11 years are being observed. All data is being handled confidentially. The researchers have also attended some staff meetings and SDP planning days as observers. The plans themselves as well as any other relevant documentation are also being analysed. The inspectors most closely associated with the nine schools have been interviewed.

A questionnaire survey of all LEAs in the United Kingdom has been carried out. A 100% response has been achieved from all 110 LEAs in England, 8 in Wales, 12 in Scotland and 5 in Northern Ireland. Many LEAs have also responded to our request for guidelines and relevant documentation.

Classroom observations have focused on physical evidence relating to priorities in the School Development Plan. Detailed descriptive information and information on pupil activity, interaction, behaviour , display of work and resources has also been noted. Classteacher planning, record keeping and assessment have been collected.

All semi-structured interviews have gathered information on the formulation, implementation and evaluation of the school's Development Plan. Previous, ongoing, new and future priorities and their source have also been discussed.

International links with researchers in Canada, North America and Australia have also been established. There is a replication study based at Griffith and Queensland

Universities, Australia directed by Dr. Neil Dempster . It is hoped that the research teams will present joint papers at ICSEI 1994 in Melbourne, Australia. (International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement).

We continue to develop a firm theoretical base for our research which both draws together and develops work in the areas of change, management, school effectiveness and school improvement. We are building this theoretical framework into data that is emerging from our detailed interviews in the schools, particularly those with headteachers and classteachers. Theoretical relationships and examples from our emerging grounded theory are then being incorporated into the development of new research instruments.

At the time of writing, the research project enters its final academic year. Data collection is therefore incomplete and findings tentative. However we are able to report positively on the interest and on the high level of co-operation and help that we have received from all those working in the schools and LEAs with which we have been in contact.

Emerging issues

Some emerging issues concern the following:

1. School culture, mission and climate.

Exploring the different definitions used to describe and analyse the development of a school's culture, their validity and how these are then translated into a way forward have provided us with interesting starting points for our detailed discussions with teaching staff and headteachers in schools. (Fullan M.G. and Stiegelbauer S. 1991 "The New Meaning of Educational Change" Cassell and Louis K.S. and Miles M.B. 1992 "Improving the Urban High School" Cassell). How a school improvement strategy such as School Development Plans and planning are supported and developed by the existing culture of the school as well as the impact this innovation has on the culture of the school are issues of particular interest to the research team (Hargreaves D. and Hopkins D. 1991 "The Empowered School : The management and practice of development planning" Cassell).

The methods used and who is involved in the process of developing a plan is one of our major areas for investigation. How these are then translated into curriculum and instructional practices via the individual organisational and management structures and practices of an individual school is another major focus of investigation. (Chrispeels J.H. 1992 draft book "Purposeful restructuring: creating a culture for learning and achievement in elementary schools").

2. External support.

The differential support and guidance that is available from LEAs appears to vary widely as do the methods used to communicate policy or desired policy to schools via LEA representatives. Information already gathered from some of the headteachers in our sample group indicate the tensions in the balance of control between LEA structural guidance and school led strategies and formats. A desire for uniformity of approach and style from all schools has advantages for a LEA which can conflict with the ownership and individuality of a school's response. (Fullan M. 1992 "What's worth fighting for in headship?" Open University Press).

3. Significant influences.

Exploring significant influences on the current practices of class and headteachers such as contact with professional colleagues, documentation and publications are

beginning to reveal patterns of national externally imposed influences such as Local Management of Schools (LMS), the National Curriculum and the nature and quality of previous experiences. There is emerging evidence of the changing roles of key LEA individuals within and between LEAs in disseminating interest in, training and common approaches to the planning process and the components of the plan itself. The nature of this outside involvement and how this is changing over time is also of interest.

4. The Planning process.

The critical interface between the process of putting a plan together, the content and nature of the plan, who is involved and the methods they employ to do this are providing us with much rich qualitative data. The relationship between INSET and personal roles and responsibilities, the allocation of resources and the links between INSET and the identification, implementation and adoption of priorities within the development plan provide multi -faceted, multi-level opportunities for data collection and analysis as do the tensions between the maintenance and continuation of priorities from previous years and the implementation of new priorities. (Nias J., Southworth G. and Campbell P. 1992 "Whole School Curriculum Development in the Primary School" Falmer Press). We are interested in following this process through in our nine sample schools, in particular examining the efficacy of the planning process and the difficulties and successes of putting the School Development Plans into practice.

5. Rhetoric and reality.

The multi-dimensional nature of the rhetoric/reality gap and how it affects the development and impact of priorities within a school and the curriculum and learning outcomes which make up the opportunities for learning that are available to individual teachers and pupils.

6. Drawing on literature from education and beyond.

The transferability of models of management to help identify patterns of delegation/ authority in planning processes and the nature of organisations (Sergiovanni T.J. 1992 "Moral Leadership" Jossey-Bass and Handy C. and Aitken R. 1986 "Understanding Schools as Organisations" Penguin) have encouraged our thinking on effective implementation of change. Work which has been done on identifying major components in the management structure of schools and the relationships between them is also proving to be useful. (Hoyle E. 1986 "The Politics of School Management" Hodder and Stoughton) and the importance of leadership styles (Chrispeels J.H. 1992 op cit). Other issues concerning professional behaviour are those concerned with the professional maturity and whole school outlook that is needed for a perspective that goes beyond the teacher's role within the classroom (Nias J., Southworth G. and Campbell P. 1992 op cit and Hopkins D. 1991 "Changing school culture through development planning" in Riddell S. and Brown S. (Eds.) "School Effectiveness Research" HMSO).

It is anticipated that data collection in schools will be completed by May 1994. The research team are planning the publication of a book reporting on the whole project.

Jane Savage
September 1993

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